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Buxton marks waste cleanup at former mill

By GRACE MURPHY, Staff Writer

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BUXTON — Townspeople stood at the bank of the Saco River on Tuesday at the site of the former Rogers Fibre Mill and bid goodbye to an era and an eyesore.

The mill, which employed dozens of residents between 1917 and 1980, was torn down over 15 months as part of a \$3.2 million project to clean up hazardous materials.

A celebration marking the end of the project featured U.S. Sen. Olympia Snowe, U.S. Department of Environmental Protection officials who worked on the project, and state and local dignitaries. The event began inside the former Bar Mills fire station on Depot Street and ended with the unveiling of a commemorative plaque outside near the river.

Harlan "Blackie" Dearborn, who once poured the concrete foundation for one of the buildings, said it was time for the mill to come down.

"It was a good thing when it was here. It gave a lot of people jobs. But I won't miss what it was at the end," he said.

The mill was built in 1917 and produced fiberboard products for shoes, cars and luggage. It was shut down in 1980, and by the early '90s roof collapses and vandalism were common and rainstorms washed boards into the river.

Former Selectman Bob Brandenstein and state Sen. James Libby helped attract the interest of Gov. Angus King and Snowe. King got the state Department of Environmental Protection on

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board and Snowe arranged for a visit from the EPA.

The agency took on the project in June 1998 because of the mill's proximity to the river, the types of pollutants inside and the threats they could pose to salmon restocking efforts.

"The result is a tremendous benefit not only for Bar Mills and Buxton, but also for the six towns that draw more than 2 billion gallons of drinking water from the Saco River each year," Snowe said.

Communities including Biddeford, Buxton, Old Orchard Beach and Saco rely on the Saco River for their drinking water.

The EPA found tanks and drums full of chemicals in the basement of the mill. Some of the materials contained chromium, copper, lead, zinc and mercury. The pollutants, along with 6,000 tons of contaminated soil, were removed and the four mill buildings torn down.

Now that the property is clean, town officials must decide whether to let it remain as open space, sell it or find a use for it.

"We haven't sat down and talked about it yet. We wanted to get the cleanup over with," Selectman Cliff Emery said.

The owner of record is CFH Inc., a corporation set up by Pat Canonica of Boxford, Mass. There is \$6,867.64 worth of taxes owed on the property.

Earlier this year, residents voted to waive foreclosure so the town would not have to take ownership of the land and become responsible for the costs.

Many of those at Tuesday's ceremony used to work at the mill or had relatives who did.

During the ceremony, Brandenstein read a letter from Agnes Wiggin, whose husband David and in-laws worked at the mill in the 1920s.

"One of my fond memories is the remembrance of buggy rides past the mill on my way to high school," she wrote. "From the second-story window David watched as I passed and waved both morning and afternoon. This young man was to become my future husband."

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